

## Immigration: The *Real* Kennedy Legacy

By Patrick Reddy

In 1969, former JFK speechwriter Ted Sorenson penned *The Kennedy Legacy*, a tribute to the Kennedy brothers who, the author maintained, inspired a generation of young idealists. The Kennedy mystique continues today as polls show that Jack Kennedy is the favorite leader of the Baby Boomers with Bobby close behind. But forget Camelot, the Bays of Pigs, the Peace Corps, and the Missile Crisis. The Kennedys have a substantive legacy that is much more important: The 1965 Immigration Reform Act promoted by President Kennedy, drafted by Attorney General Robert Kennedy, and pushed through the Senate by Ted Kennedy has resulted in a wave of immigration from the Third World that should shift the nation in a more liberal direction within a generation. It will go down as the Kennedy family's greatest gift to the Democratic Party.

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### The 1965 Act Quashes Immigration Quotas

Prior to 1965, the most important immigration bill passed was in 1924, which reduced immigration by over 80% annually. From 1880 through 1924, America had admitted a total of 25 million immigrants, mainly from Southern and Eastern Europe. This huge influx of Catholics and Jews touched off a nativist backlash from the country's Protestant majority in the Midwest and South. The 1924 Act also contained a notorious quota system that was designed to maintain the nation's then ethnic balance. For example, if 3% of the population was of Italian descent, only 3% of the new immigrants could be from Italy. For many years, reversing this practice was high on the agenda of the liberal Northern wing of the Democratic Party (John Kennedy was an outspoken advocate of immigration reform in the Senate during the 1950s and Ted Kennedy later took up his cause). But the twin crises of the Depression and Second World War diverted attention from immigration, and conservatives routinely blocked any proposed changes.

By the 1960s, however, the children of these immigrants had come to power as symbolized by JFK's election as the nation's first Catholic president. With the economy booming, a consensus had grown that America could afford to be more generous in its admissions policy. The civil rights movement helped; if the nation was tearing down racial barriers at home, why should it continue to discriminate against potential newcomers? And the Democrats owed these minorities: Asians tipped Hawaii narrowly to JFK while the Hispanic vote provided victory margins in Texas, Illinois, New Jersey, and New Mexico.

An immigration reform act was moving through Congress when President Kennedy was assassinated in 1963. The bill—abolishing the quota system and increasing immigration—was signed into law by President Johnson in 1965.

For all its current importance, immigration had almost no impact on the politics of the late 1960s when the Vietnam War and race riots were the leading issues. Such

social turmoil led to the independent presidential candidacy of George Wallace who ran on a platform of “law and order” and anti-welfare rhetoric. Wallace helped peel away two previously Democratic-leaning groups: Southerners and working class whites.

The party split caused by the war and the loss of the blue collar vote (in places like South Philadelphia, Cleveland's Westside, and Chicago's Southwest neighborhoods) proved fatal to Hubert Humphrey's bid in 1968. The realignment prompted by Wallace resulted in a net loss of nearly 10 million votes for the Democrats from 1960 to 1968. The strength of this new conservative alignment was demonstrated when Nixon, Reagan, and Bush combined most of the Wallace vote with traditional Republican business support to win five out of six national elections from 1968 through 1988. It seemed Democrats faced a chronic deficit of white votes.

### Building Support in the Sun Belt

So what are Democrats to do when social issues have driven a wedge into their coalition? One approach would be to court conservatives, but that would likely erode support from the Democrats' liberal base. Another option would be to find new issues. Bill Clinton succeeded here, but his support appears to be personal as the Republicans retain control of Congress. The Democrats could wait for another catastrophe like 1932, but this is hardly an attractive posture. The final approach would be to develop new constituencies. Jesse Jackson accomplished this when he registered 2 million more Black Democrats in the 1980s. And the peak immigration levels of the last generation have opened up another opportunity for Democrats.

Since the late 1970s, total legal and illegal immigration has averaged over 1 million per year (nearly twice

the peak levels of the last century) with roughly 85% coming from Latin America (over 60%) and Asia. Just as European immigrants populated the cities of the Frost Belt, Hispanics and Asians are now doing the same for the Sun Belt cities. Los Angeles, San Antonio, and El Paso now have Hispanic majorities. Houston, Dallas, and San Jose had non-white majorities in 1990; San Diego, Tucson, Las Vegas, and Albuquerque soon will. So the potential Democratic base in the Sun Belt is there. A massive, permanent mobilization of Hispanic voters would swing California, Colorado, New Mexico, and Nevada into the Democratic column and threaten the GOP hold on Texas, Florida, and Arizona. (These states alone have over half the electoral votes needed to win the presidency.)

For many years after renewed mass immigration began in the mid-1960s, this ethnic shift had almost no impact on national politics. Hispanics and Asians were slow to register, together casting less than 5% of the nation's vote. And in the 1980s, many immigrants in California supported Ronald Reagan, thus neutralizing any potential Democratic bloc vote among Hispanics and Asians. This began to change in 1992 when the recession helped elect Bill Clinton as immigrants swung to him along with millions of other Americans.

### A Republican Miscue That Could Be Fatal

After the 1992 election, Republicans led by California Governor Pete Wilson and Pat Buchanan panicked and used immigration as a scapegoat for various problems. They promoted Proposition 187 (which cuts off all public services to illegal immigrants) and helped enshrine this doctrine in the GOP national platform. The strategy worked in the short run as Wilson was re-elected with a bloc white vote. But it will likely hurt Republicans in the future as Hispanics and Asians have turned to the Democrats in droves. Wilson received over a third of the Hispanic vote in his 1990 gubernatorial bid and just 19% in 1994 after campaigning hard for 187. The Democratic margin from California Hispanics jumped from 134,000 in 1990 to 421,000 in 1994 and hit an all-time record high of 664,000 in 1996.

And 1994 was just the beginning: Both the Asian and Hispanic communities set records for turnout in 1996 (while going strongly for President Clinton) and with historically low turnout their portion of the national electorate can only grow. For example, immigrants have helped change Ronald Reagan's home turf of California into a Democratic state. If Democratic gubernatorial nominee Gray Davis wins this fall, the Hispanic vote will provide his victory margin. Representative Loretta Sanchez is the first Democratic congresswoman from Orange

County, and the last two Democratic Speakers of the Assembly have been Cruz Bustamante and Antonio Villaraigosa.

From 1988 to 1996, the Hispanic and Asian share of the electorate doubled from 5 to 10%. The process of an increasing minority share of the vote has begun that will see blacks, Hispanics, and Asians casting about 30% of the national vote within a generation. And given that immigrant-bashers like Wilson and Buchanan have set the Republican Party's tone on this issue, it looks like the GOP has alienated the fastest growing groups in the electorate. These trends could be fatal for Republicans because at its projected peak, the new immigrants could add roughly 8 million votes to the national Democratic ticket.

An anti-immigration group recently ran ads in the conservative magazine *National Review* with a picture of Ted Kennedy in an attempt to use conservative displeasure of him in the immigration debate. The ad quoted Teddy from the debate on the 1965 immigration bill, predicting (wrongly, as it turned out) that this bill would neither greatly increase total immigration nor change the ethnic mix of America. But while these ads may convert some conservatives to the anti-immigrant cause, it will also remind the children of immigrants that the Democrats are on their side.

When Ted Kennedy was defeated in his 1980 presidential bid, Hispanics were the only group that stayed loyal, presumably in gratitude for the Kennedy family's stance on immigration. And who knows, perhaps the children of today's immigrants will someday help put another member of the Kennedy clan in high office?

But even if no other Kennedy wins, their legacy of immigration reform will last. The Asian-American valedictorians, affluent professionals, and successful business people on both coasts plus the Hispanic neighborhoods of the Southwest with their vibrant culture and beautiful families are living proof of the Kennedy influence on 21st century America. These groups have already changed American society; they will soon change our politics. A book in the late 1970s named JFK as one of the "100 most important people in world history," for his sponsorship of the space program. That historical legacy may indeed become very important for the entire planet someday. But his most significant contribution to American history is a multi-ethnic nation, created largely by immigration.

This immigration reform of the 1960s has produced a whole new generation of Democrats. What more could Democrats ask for?



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